

Looking Back On Nashville Skyline After 40 Years

by Peter Stone Brown

[*This started out not as an article but a semi-comical post to the Bob Dylan forum at the Never Ending Pool website. A lot of people like it, so I decided to include it here.*]

It was a bright, sunny late winter or early spring, or somewhere in-between day when *Nashville Skyline* found its way to the browsers of record stores. I first heard it in a store on the upper west side of Manhattan, at 115th Street and Broadway, where a bunch of people were hanging around, clutching the copies they were about to buy for three dollars and ninety-nine cents.

A lot of people were wondering what happened to Bob's voice, as it had turned from well, Bob's voice into this smooth, crooning baritone or something. Now some people, myself included, had already been through that shock a month or so before when National Educational Television (the predecessor to PBS) aired the documentary, *Johnny Cash, the Man & His Music*, which later that year would be released to movie theaters. Midway through the film (which by the way is quite good), a gum chewing Bob Dylan suddenly appears behind a barricade of microphones and let loose with *that* voice on the second verse of "One Too Many Mornings," causing Dylan fans everywhere to say, what the hell was that? Actually they didn't say what the hell, they said something else.

Now you have to keep in mind that most people hadn't seen Bob Dylan since 1966 or even 1965, unless they went to the Woody Guthrie Memorial Concert at Carnegie Hall, and the tickets for that sold out before most people knew they were even on sale. So a lot of people who saw that TV show were left wandering the streets and wondering if they really saw and heard what they saw until *Nashville Skyline* was released, which only left them wondering if maybe this was gonna be the way it was forever. Not long after that, some reporter caught up with Dylan's mom, who said, "Oh that's his real voice, that's the way he always sang." Not many people believed that, but it turned out, like moms usually are, that she was right, because a couple of decades later, a tape recorded about a year before Bob Dylan had a recording contract appeared that well, found him singing some old English ballads in that very voice.

There were many significant things about *Nashville Skyline*. It was the second Bob Dylan album to have nothing printed on the front cover, and not only that, he was wearing the same suede jacket that

he wore not only on *John Wesley Harding*, but on *Blonde On Blonde*. But it was the last time that jacket would appear on a Bob Dylan album cover, so far anyway. (Note for the hardcore completist, European compilation albums don't count in this regard.)

Another thing about *Nashville Skyline* was there more people involved in making it named Charles (or Charlie as the case may be) than any Bob Dylan album before or since. There was Charlie McCoy who has appeared on more Bob Dylan albums than anyone except for Al Kooper, Charlie Daniels, who would later be known for wearing big hats, playing the fiddle and right-wing political rants, and Charlie Bragg the engineer. There were also three Bob's involved. There was Bob Dylan himself of course, Bob "I just let the tapes roll" Johnston the producer, and Bob Wilson the piano player.

Unlike the previous album, there were no tiny little pictures of Beatles hidden in the bark of the tree or even the leaves of the tree which in this case are pretty sparse, though some say the Gibson J-200 that Dylan is holding on the cover, belonged to a Beatle, namely George Harrison, even though it pretty much looks like a standard Gibson J-200. The album also features a Johnny Cash poem of sorts written by Johnny Cash, which he ends, by saying, "Herein is a hell of a poet," which is pretty funny because it was the least poetic collection of original songs Bob Dylan had released at that point. [Not long after, Dylan would write a parody of sorts of those notes for Eric Von Schmidt's album, *Who Knocked The Brains Out The Sky?* where he wrote: "He can separate the men from the boys and the note from the noise. The bridle from the saddle and the cow from the cattle. He can play the tune of the moon. The why of the sky and the commotion of the ocean."

Anyway, some people spent a lot of time searching the *Nashville Skyline* lyrics for greater significance. Some wondered if Little Jack Horner was really Little Jack Horner, or whether not throwing a pie up in anyone's face was an allusion to Dylan leaving the revolution he never was part of, or if love really was all there is. Someone I know thought that the most meaningful line on the album was, "I could not be what she wanted me to be."

Some people immediately moved to the country, started heating brown rice and took courses on using a wood stove. Musicians, especially those from California, threw away their fuzz boxes, and had their album covers taken on frumpy porches and wrote songs about pickin' and grinnin' and country livin'.

Meanwhile for those who keep track of such things, *Nashville Skyline* began Dylan's phase of releasing albums with two word titles, which would continue (not counting soundtracks) for his next three albums. The next such phase would be his "S" period which began in 1978.

However, one of the most interesting things about *Nashville Skyline*, despite it's prompting lots of musicians to enter what became known for better or worse as country rock, is that few of the songs on it are actually county song structurally or literally. Not one song has a chorus, not one song has a "hook line," which was prevalent in Nashville songwriting at the time. Only "One More Night" comes close to country music structurally or chord-wise. Structurally the songs are much closer to the music of Memphis, and also the stuff Charlie Rich was recording at the time for Smash Records, which was much closer to R&B than country. Years later Rich would emerge for a few years as a country artist, though he eventually went back to his first loves, R&B and jazz. But if you check out some of Rich's recordings at the time of *Nashville Skyline*, musically and vocally, that is probably what Dylan was aiming for, realized in the album's best tracks, "I Threw It All Away," "Lay Lady Lay" and "Tonight I'll Be Staying Here With You."

However, *Nashville Skyline* does have some of Dylan's most realized in-the-studio arrangements, thanks to the notable crew of musicians backing him. Not much detail has emerged about these sessions, and some sources indicate more musicians played than are actually listed on the album cover. The playing on the album made you want to find out more about the other musicians, and opened my eyes to Norman Blake, who plays acoustic guitar and according to *Rolling Stone* magazine at the time also dobro. Listening to this album just now, I realized that has to be Norman Blake playing the acoustic lead on "Nashville Skyline Rag," and if he also contributed the dobro, than a good deal of the picking on that song is him. He's an incredible guitarist and great songwriter in his own right.

While *Nashville Skyline* ultimately turned out to be a brief escapade, especially vocally, it showed that Dylan was quite capable of writing a straight love song without grand poetic allusions, and when he would eventually revisit this style of writing, it was neither shocking or surprising. But it sure had people wondering had the time.